"To promote understanding and appreciation of the religious and spiritual values which abide in the processes and relationships of agriculture and rural life; to define their significance and relate them to the Christian enterprise at home and abroad."

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RURAL POVERTY AND RURAL MORALE*

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Loss of morale is a mark of wide sections of the American population in our times. The disadvantaged among both urban and rural peoples suffer, with varying degrees, from this malady. Weakening of morale in the rural population is chiefly caused by poverty, isolation and mobility. These factors lower morale in numerous ways:

First, by decreasing the quality of the population through the migration of those individuals with the best leadership patterns who are expelled by unfavorable forces in the environment.

Second, by diminishing expectancy and hope for the opportunities and goods of life on the part of the disadvantaged classes in agriculture.

Third, by destroying initiative and the philosophy of creativeness in the underprivileged farmers and village folk.

Fourth, by weakening in the landless farmer the essential sense of the soil which can be derived only through personal ownership and operation of good land which shows its friendliness by fruitful production.

Fifth, by lessening personal development and efficiency, especially among the inhabitants of the rural 'slums.'

Sixth, by deadening the higher religious appreciations and inhibiting the capacity to participate in historically mature, theologically rational and socially pertinent expressions of religion in town and country.

I

Not every one recognizes either the existence or the effects of this loss of rural morale. Many people see only a part of the agricultural situation, viewing all farmers as mere 'hicks' or as prosperous self-sufficient citizens. They tend to see in all village dwellers only 'small town' bigots or mark them as happily situated in a perfect suburban haven.

Some farmers are, indeed, the strength of America. Having education, culture, social status and a fair share of this world's goods their morale is

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high. To minister to them the church must be relatively mature in its outlook, fairly rational in its theology and reasonably pertinent to worldly affairs.

Such a view, however, forgets the growing mass of disadvantaged rural peoples. It leaves out the large number of piteous sharecroppers, low-income renters, mobile farm hands, homeless migrant agricultural laborers, farmers on the poor land, isolated hill folk, scattered populations in the sparsely settled grazing areas, 'dust bowl refugees' and other underprivileged farm groups.

The usual idyllic picture fails to consider the rural 'slums' in the degenerated half-abandoned small mining, fishing and industrial towns and the dwellers 'across the tracks' in any village. It forgets the 'skims' who are the result of folk depletion in the cut-over land, in the river bends and in the mountain and hill country everywhere. These are the rural people who lack medical care, adequate libraries, sufficient sanitation and other good things of life.

These farmer do not have, as some people assume, big white houses nestled in luxurious groves, spacious red barns, or a fleet of motors. And their children do not go off to college in very large numbers. Furthermore, they rarely attend the mature churches such as those represented in the membership of the Home Missions Council and the Federal Council of Churches of Christ in America. Instead, they usually find religious significance in that growing group of little sects which may be designated as the 'holy rollers.' Or they make, for all practical purposes, 'holy roller' churches of the local congregations of the mature denominations which are already established in their respective communities.

This situation creates a new issue for the rural church. It is no longer merely a problem of the unreached for the more mature denominations such as the Methodists, Northern Baptists, Congregationalists, Presbyterians and Episcopalians, but, rather, a problem of the unreachables. There are now millions of disadvantaged rural Americans whom the older denominations cannot enlist because these underprivileged folk do not have the intellectual and cultural equipment with which to appreciate what the mature churches have to offer.

In a report entitled, "The Disadvantaged Classes in American Agriculture," the Bureau of Agricultural Economics of the United States Department of Agriculture, has made it clear that it would be fairly accurate to say that about one-third of the American farmers are in the definitely disadvantaged class, approximately one-third are relatively well off and the other third struggles in between trying to keep out of the former group and endeavoring to get into the latter. It is apparent, also, that the rural town with a population of less than 2500 maintains approximately these proportions and furnishes its full share of that 'one-third of a nation ill-housed, ill-clad, ill-nourished.' At any rate, whatever their numbers, it is the disadvantaged rural folk who are losing their morale that the liberal churches are not reaching or whom they hold only at the cost of their liberalism in those of their congregations which turn the trick locally.

Thus, large numbers of the 'lower third' turn 'holy roller' or drop out of the church entirely, not by deliberate choice, but because their economic and cultural status and the condition of their morale make it practically impossible for them to do otherwise. Therefore, the plight of the rural people becomes the concern of the church for 'evangelistic' reasons, not to speak of economic, social and humanitarian considerations by the followers of Jesus Christ who will not stand by complacently while their fellows suffer.

Taken alone the emotional sect leaves little doubt in the student's mind that it represents the religion of the poorer classes. Charles W. Ferguson in his "The Confusion of Tongues," says of them that they are "the religion of the consciously second-rate," which "would never have gained so strong a hold had it not been for the under-dog's superb sympathy with himself."* In "The Small Sects in America," Elmer T. Clark states, "In the first place, its dissatisfaction with the world and despair of escape through social processes" characterize the sect as that of the disinherited class which "seeks the customary direct intervention of God on behalf of its own group." The sect, therefore, has its rise in "the consciousness of inferiority and its basis in the economic situation of the group." **

Of course, it is not forgotten that there are many privileged laymen in the mature churches who look only for a heaven-bound religion. This fact is often discovered whenever a pastor takes an interest in the disadvantaged or asks the church to consider the need and possibility of moving on to a more just society which would give an equitable distribution of the goods of life. A glance at the location of the more liberal pulpits will reveal, at once, the fact that they are not often in the definitely disadvantaged regions.

II

It should be emphasized that this cultural pattern of religion is not simply due to economic circumstances. Though the well-to-do are generally found in the mature churches and the disadvantaged in the irrational congregations or sects, it is not necessarily a matter of class consciousness. It is more nearly a matter of cultural status. One must take account of all three of the causes of the loss of morale mentioned at the outset, namely, poverty, isolation and mobility.

Poverty, of course, is the greatest cause behind the loss of cultural morale. If people do not have the economic wherewithal for education, books, travel and proper social intercourse over a number of generations, they naturally lose contact with the typical culture. Since this 'typical American culture' is closely associated with our more mature Protestantism the economically disadvantaged are cut off from our older churches.

Isolation is, also, a barrier between the disadvantaged and the mature Protestant church. Those who dwell in the hilly and mountainous regions, in the river bends and in the sparsely settled grazing areas do not come into frequent contact with the main trends of thought which are characteristic of our modern world. Being left behind in regard to general culture they are, of course, arrested in their religious development. Hence, they, too, either turn to the little erratic sects or retard the development of their local congregations of the older denominations. All denominational field workers know of the generally conservative reactions of their respective churches in the isolated regions.

Mobility is the third cause of loss of contact with the typical culture, and hence, with mature Protestantism. The mobile groups in American rural life are many. There are the farm hands who feel little or no attachment to the community, the migrant agricultural laborers who have no home anywhere and the tenant farmers who move on an average once in three years, frequently packing up their worldly goods and shifting to a new farm--often in a new community--each spring. 'Newcomers' are not readily taken in by the 'old settlers.' Religiously

*Ferguson, Charles W., The Confusion of Tongues, p. 88, New York, 1929, Doubleday, Doran and Company

**Clark, Elmer T., The Small Sects in America, p. 62., Nashville, 1937. Cokesbury Press

speaking, the only alternative of the mobile class is to seek fellowship in a church or a sect which welcomes them and whose message they can appreciate.

There are those who may question the accuracy of this account of the cultural behavior of religion because of the numerical smallness of the little sects. Is not some 95 per cent of the Protestant membership in 50 of the larger denominations? Besides, the numerical growth of the 'holy rollers' is not as significant as might be expected, they argue. The failure of the more mature denominations to keep pace with the loss of morale in rural life cannot be determined by statistics. As stated before, much of the effect of the disadvantaged class upon religion is to be found within the mature religious bodies where low income, isolation and mobility have led to conservative and other-worldly congregations.

On the other hand, the little sects are growing. It is not without significance that the Nazarenes had the largest membership gain of any denomination in the past year. And Aimee Semple McPherson's growing rural following is not to be ignored. There is the further fact that the congregations of the newer sects are usually very small. They are, also, highly transient. Groups are formed and fail before they are reported and others arise to take their place. This process seems to be part and parcel of their struggle to be born. Still further, many of them have the traditional aversion of the beginning sect to organization and formal membership. They often keep no rolls, hence, there is no way of counting large numbers of them.

III

One should hasten to say a good word for the 'holy rollers.' In order to do so, it is necessary to appreciate the historic place and the cultural significance of the little sect. This can best be shown by a story which begins in the southern colonies. In Virginia and the Carolinas the Church of England had the field in Colonial days. But this body was the church of the planter and the southern gentlemen of the George Washington type. After the Revolution this church, of course, became the Protestant Episcopal denomination. Economic and cultural classifications gradually arose. Back of the tide-water country were the poor farmers. They were the Methodists with their revivals and jerks, the Baptists with their gospel songs and 'rousements,' the Presbyterians with their harsh damnation theology and the Congregationalists of Calvinism, witchcraftry and Blue Law fame. These were the poor, hoi polloi, the 'holy rollers' of that period.

But they each had a vote in the new order after the Revolution. Thomas Jefferson became their defender against the gentry and it was they who put him into power. Being in political power they legislated themselves into a more advantageous position economically. Having money they began to pay their preachers and build substantial churches, modernized with organs and other polite accouterments.

But a paid ministry gets an education, an educated ministry becomes rational in theology and a comfortable people develop an educational and cultural background which makes it possible for them to accept a rational religion. Thus, the Methodists, Baptists, Presbyterians and Puritans grew up into mature denominations. Meanwhile, Episcopalianism still sought only the 'best people' in the old rural class and naturally lost ground with the decrease of the gentry until it became a relatively small denomination in the rural South.

There are 601 Episcopal rural churches in Virginia and the Carolinas. The southern bodies of the Presbyterians, Baptists and Methodists have 9,046 rural

churches in these same states. Any observer will testify to the excellent quality of work being done by the Episcopal rural churches in this region. We are merely calling attention to the fact that their number is far from the original hundred per cent of the field which they once had.

Now history is repeating itself. The matured Methodists, Baptists, Presbyterians and Puritans came, also, to seek only the 'best people' among plantation owners, merchants, bankers and the like in the new middle and upper classes. But during the past hundred years a new polloi has been growing up. They are the modern sharecroppers, poor landowners, isolated folk, village slum dwellers and the other disadvantaged rural peoples 'across the tracks,' culturally speaking. This group has either retarded certain congregations of these older denominations or turned to the new proletarian sects of the Four Square Gospel, Holiness, Pentecostal, Apostolic, Church of God and Nazarene order. The Episcopal Church in the rural South lost its hold on the old rural masses and now, apparently, the Methodists, Baptists, Presbyterians and Congregationalists are unable to reach the new rural masses. Congregationalists of the old Puritan background, never very strong in this region, have already practically disappeared.

Unless the present peasant class is doomed to remain permanently at the bottom of the ladder, this trend indicates that the contemporary 'holy rollers' will eventually come into economic power and develop until they, too, find themselves matured, running after the 'best people,' and finally on the shelf as a new group of hoi polloi grows up, in turn, under them.

For the little sects do grow up. Some of us can remember when a preacher in the Church of God or the Church of the Nazarene had 'horns.' Twenty years ago they refused to wear collars and neckties and went around with a brass button showing from the band of a collarless shirt. Today you can see many young pastors in these bodies, well-dressed and with considerable formal education, taking part in ministers' associations and union services with Methodists, Baptists, Presbyterians and Congregationalists whom they were calling ungodly only a few years ago.

A recent article on the 'holy rollers' published in the Christian Century brought forth many letters from the 'holy rollers' themselves. Pastors of Pentecostal, Apostolic and Holiness churches are beginning to read the Christian Century! They are growing up, 'Believe it or not!'

We recognize, therefore, the historic place and the cultural significance of the erratic sect for if it were not for them the disadvantaged farmer and village dweller--and the underprivileged city dweller, for that matter--would have no church.

Does such a trend have to be? The answer is, Yes, as long as our churches are so enmeshed in the secular order that they take on the cultural and economic patterns of our society. Though the 'holy rollers' of today will evidently become the liberal churches of tomorrow, one cannot help regretting the fact that there should be such a great waste of time in the century or so of irrational and socially irrelevant struggle in the transition.

IV

There are other illustrations of the cultural behavior of religion. What about Connecticut where the Episcopal Church continues to grow until it becomes the leading denomination? This situation further sustains the theory that morale largely determines the religious pattern. In Connecticut there are no sharecroppers of the cotton type, few farm hands and practically no migrants. The

river bend and hill country settlements are built up communities where the New York Times and the Herald Tribune are widely read. Artists, writers and commuters live among the people at least part of the year. Radios, telephones and automobiles are a part of the daily lives of most of the families. In general, the citizens of Connecticut are the kind of people who can appreciate the art, forms and theology of Episcopalianism.

Here, though, it has to be remembered that already the 'hut-dwellers' pushed out from the cities by the depression, the 'reliefers,' the poorer non-Catholic industrial workers and many farmers are beginning to develop their little sects. Were it not for the Baptist denomination, many of whose congregations successfully enlist the common people, the situation would be even worse.

One more question arises. Why does the Catholic Church usually hold its proletariat along with its gentry? In the first place, it seems that the factor of social status is not so important in church attendance in Catholicism. One does not go to services to see and be seen but to receive the blessing of the Church. In the Mass one does not merely look at one's neighbor. One watches the priest and looks with hopeful expectancy to what is happening at the altar, anxious to get the benediction which comes from that source. Under such circumstances it makes little difference whether it be a beggar or a banker that sits in the pew at one's side.

In the second place, Catholic religion is adjusted to all sorts of men. It has its beauty, its art and its deep meanings for those who can appreciate them. It has its forms, its Novenas and its miraculous medals for those who cannot.

For a full view of the Catholic reaction to cultural patterns we would need to know much more about their extra-church social life. Do the same people who sit together in riches and rags during High Mass belong to the same social clubs? Do they go to the same plays and concerts? Is their social intercourse, such as calling at each other's homes and having meals together, participated in equally by all classes or do they follow cultural lines in much the same way as do the members of other churches? Observation leads one to suspect that, outside of the Mass, Catholics are simply 'good' Protestants.

V

It is evident, then, that the relationship of rural religion to rural morale brings our type of Protestantism face to face with some very real problems. A folk without enough to eat will not be readily able to follow us unless we radically change our ways. It is not a question whether the demoralized folk in rural life are actually inferior or whether their lack of adequate cultural opportunities merely make them appear that way. Their morale has been lowered and it is obvious that the religion of the well-fed, the well-dressed and the self-satisfied cannot appeal to them.

The disadvantaged American farmer is too much inclined to 'take it lying down.' The situation is partly complicated by a successful indoctrination of the American farmer, even the disadvantaged farmer, with good bourgeois philosophy. But it, also, indicates a lack of morale and expectancy. For religion this lack of expectancy is significant. If you do not have prospects in this life, you look for them in the future world. If you do not have bread now, there is at least 'pie in the sky bye and bye.' So, you turn to the local congregation or sect that preaches that other-worldliness which meets your needs.

The culturally disadvantaged--in other words, the rural people who have

lost their morale--turn to the 'holy rollers' because our social order has made 'holy roller' candidates of them!

1. They seek and get psychological release. Defeated, hemmed in and without money with which to create their own moods through the best movies, travel, reading and other diversions, they go to the revival meeting where they obtain psychological release in 'rousements,' shoutings and 'amens,' an opportunity which our liberal churches could not stoop to give them.

2. They seek escape and get it. Economic disadvantage denies them the goods of the abundant life. Their secret urges are thwarted, their inner longings crushed. An escape religion is the answer. In contrast, our mature Protestantism serves the satisfied. Its constituents are in no need of escape, for life is good to them. What they want is to be patted on the back spiritually and to have their behavior so rationalized that they can live with themselves as they are.

3. They seek and get a sense of personal significance. A common person who can neither read nor write may become the chief deacon in the Four Square Gospel hall or the Two-Seed-in-the-Spirit Predestenarian congregation. He is consulted and his word counts for something in the little group, whereas, he would do well to merit the privilege of a back pew in the liberal Methodist or Congregational church where dress, good manners and financial standing bulk so large.

4. They want and get a religion that they can afford. The 'holy roller' preacher, often a woman, is willing to live on very little because of the sense of urgency to preach the Gospel. Our older churches, on the other hand, expect the members to help pay a heavy budget and pass the offering plate at every service where everybody can see what you give.

5. They seek and get a religion that they can appreciate and understand. Warmth, enthusiasm, authority and simplicity characterize the message of the little sect. The mature churches cannot go in for the excesses and irrational concepts of the 'holy rollers' but could they not have greater sympathy for the underprivileged and develop a message which meets the needs of those whose morale is low?

VI

Is there any solution to the problem of evangelism for the older denominations among the disadvantaged rural people?

1. If it is to win the people who have lost their morale, the Protestant Church must rise above its present cultural provincialism. It must be more inclusive than a Rotary Club or the Farm Bureau.

2. Our evangelism must begin with social action and rural education in order to lift the economic status, the cultural standards and the religious appreciations of the masses in town and country by giving them a better economic base and a more modern education.

3. Our older denominations need, meanwhile, to learn to talk the language of those who lack morale and not merely limit themselves to a message for only the optimistic and successful. We must learn to hold effective fellowship with farm hands, sharecroppers, low income renters, poor landowners, 'reliefers,' and other dwellers in the rural slums. Why should not a liberal message be 'warm' and personal, as well as rational and social?

4. We must recognize the historic and social significance of the little sects, giving them what cooperation and fellowship we can. We must have patience with them during their adolescence while they struggle to become full grown denominations.

5. Most of all, we must face history with shame since it is our failure to solve the economic and cultural problems of rural life and our inability to share across cultural differentials with the disadvantaged which create the little sects.

6. Last, but not least, our mature churches must go out after and serve the poor, the religious poor.

According to the Home Missions Council there are still 10,000 villages in rural America without a church of any kind--Jewish, Roman Catholic or Protestant--and 30,000 villages without a pastor. There are 13,400,000 children under twelve years of age who are receiving no religious instruction, while more than one-half of the population of the nation is not connected with any institution representing organized religion. -- The Methodist Protestant-Recorder, September 23, 1938